



NAVY HISTORY MATTERS

February 11, 2020



Compiled by Brent Hunt, Naval History and Heritage Command's Communication and Outreach Division

Welcome to Navy History Matters—our weekly compilation of articles, commentaries, and blogs related to history and heritage. Every week we'll gather the top-interest items from a variety of media and social media sources and then link you to related content at NHHC's website (history.navy.mil), your authoritative source for Navy history.

★ H-Gram 041

In his latest H-Gram, NHHC Director [Sam Cox](#) continues coverage of the 75th anniversary of [World War II](#) with the dramatic story of the last ship sunk by German aircraft on the [Murmansk convoy run](#)—Liberty ship SS *Henry Bacon*. In addition, this H-Gram recounts [U.S. submarine](#) successes in January–February 1945—specifically [USS Barb](#) penetrating Namkwan Harbor. The boat earned a Presidential Unit Citation, and its commander, [Eugene Fluckey](#), received the [Medal of Honor](#). For the 50th anniversary of the [Vietnam War](#), the December 1969 ordeal and loss of the ammunition ship SS *Badger State* is recounted. Finally, the 60th anniversary of the historic U.S. Navy [Bathyscaphe Trieste](#)'s dive to the deepest part of the ocean is discussed. For more on these topics, [read H-Gram 041](#) at the [Director's Corner](#).



Photo Link: <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nara-series/19-n/19-N-80000/19-n-83952-uss-barb--ss-220-.html>

★ Sixth Fleet Established

On Feb. 12, 1950, 70 years ago, [U.S. Sixth Fleet](#) was established with an area of responsibility encompassing 105 countries with a combined population of more than 1 billion people, and more than 20 million square nautical miles of ocean edged by more than 67 percent of the Earth's coastline. The creation of Sixth Fleet was an important part of U.S. opposition to the Soviet Union during the [Cold War](#). However, keeping the Mediterranean from Russian domination was not the first American naval intervention into the region. The U.S. Navy operated extensively in the region during the early 19th century, but the United States did not have a permanent fleet-presence until Sixth Fleet's establishment. Until [World War II](#), the dominant naval power in the Mediterranean was the British Royal Navy. U.S. Sixth Fleet, which assumed the role the Royal Navy had played for almost two centuries, was created to be the primary military and diplomatic tool of the United States in the Mediterranean.

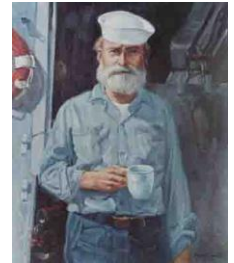


Photo Link: <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nhhc-series/nh-series/NH-97000/NH-97953-KN.html>

★ Freedom's Maiden Voyage—10 Years Ago

Littoral combat ship [USS Freedom](#) set sail on her maiden deployment on Feb. 16, 2010, to the Caribbean and eastern Pacific via the Panama Canal when the ship shifted homeport from Naval Station Mayport, FL, to San Diego, CA. *Freedom* conducted its first drug seizure six days into the deployment when crewmembers disrupted a go-fast boat off the Colombian coast, recovering more than a quarter ton of cocaine. During the voyage, the crew conducted four [narcotics' interceptions](#), seizing more than five-and-a-quarter tons of cocaine while detaining 13 smugglers. In addition, *Freedom* accomplished her first integrated at-sea operation when she exercised with aircraft carrier [USS Carl Vinson](#) in southern California waters on April 7. *Freedom*'s maiden deployment ended April 23. For more on ships named [America, Independence, and Freedom](#), visit [NHHC's infographics collection](#).



Photo Link: <https://www.navy.mil/management/photodb/photos/130222-N-DR144-174.jpg>

★ WWII@75: Elmer C. Bigelow

On Feb. 14, 1945, aboard damaged USS Fletcher, Watertender First Class Elmer C. Bigelow—refusing to waste the time required to don a breathing apparatus—plunged through the blinding smoke billowing out of a magazine hatch and dropped into the blazing compartment. Despite the overwhelming, burning powder smoke that seared his lungs with every breath, Bigelow extinguished the fire. His actions were credited with averting a magazine explosion, which would have left the stricken ship at the mercy of the Japanese guns on Corregidor. Bigelow succumbed to smoke inhalation the next day, heroically giving his life in the service of his country. He received the Medal of Honor posthumously for his “conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life and beyond the call of duty.” USS Bigelow honored the World War II hero.



Photo Link: <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nhhc-series/nh-series/NH-77000/NH-77726.html>

★ WWII@75: Owen Francis Patrick Hammerberg

On Feb. 17, 1945, Boatswain's Mate Second Class Owen Francis Patrick Hammerberg heroically saved the lives of two fellow divers who were trapped in steel wreckage during salvage operations at West Loch, Pearl Harbor. Aware of the extraordinary danger, Hammerberg unhesitatingly dove overboard, reached the first trapped man, and freed him. Exhausted, but undaunted by several hours of searching, he continued to look for the second diver. Venturing farther under the buried wreck, Hammerberg reached a place immediately above the second trapped diver, and another cave-in pinned him on the trapped diver—placing the brunt of terrific pressure on himself but protecting the trapped diver. The second diver was able to escape, but Hammerberg succumbed in agony 18 hours after he had first gone to the aid of his fellow divers. He gallantly gave his life for his shipmates. Hammerberg received the Medal of Honor posthumously for his actions. USS Hammerberg honored the World War II hero.



Photo Link: <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nhhc-series/nh-series/NH-101000/NH-101647.html>

★ WWII@75: Rufus G. Herring

On Feb. 17, 1945, Lt. Rufus G. Herring heroically took the helm of a heavily damaged landing craft gunboat during a pre-invasion attack on Iwo Jima while protecting underwater demolition swimmers. During the attack, Herring was knocked unconscious and bleeding profusely when a Japanese mortar crashed on the conning station of the gunboat, killing most of the officers and leaving the ship without navigational control. Despite his injuries, Herring regained consciousness, climbed down to the pilothouse—fighting against rapidly waning strength—seized control of the ship, and carried on until relieved. When he was no longer able to stand, Herring propped himself against empty shell cases. He maintained his position—in the face of sustained enemy fire—until the crippled ship was brought to safety. Herring received the Medal of Honor for his “unwavering fortitude, aggressive perseverance, and indomitable spirit.”



Photo Link: <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nhhc-series/nh-series/NH-104000/NH-104043.html>

★ Sink the *Montana*

In 1986, at the height of the Cold War, television show “GI Joe” released an episode featuring USS Constitution rescuing the Atlantic Fleet from rogue battleship USS Montana. Part 1 of a podcast “Sink the *Montana*,” discusses the episode and its historical origins. In part 2 of the podcast, the writer of the “GI Joe” episode that featured *Constitution*, David Carren, shares more. For additional podcast topics, check out the U.S. Naval Academy Museum’s Preble Hall.



Photo Link: <https://www.usna.edu/Museum/PrebleHall/>

★ Littoral Combat Ship *St. Louis* Delivered to Navy

Littoral combat ship USS *St. Louis* was delivered to the U.S. Navy during a ceremony at the Fincantieri Marinette Marine shipyard in Marinette, WI, Feb. 6. “This is a great day for the Navy with the delivery of the future USS *St. Louis*, which will carry into her future an important naval historical legacy,” said LCS program manager Capt. Mike Taylor. “I am extremely proud when I see the results of all the hard work and dedication of the Navy, Lockheed Martin, and the FMM team in building the Navy the nation needs.” *St. Louis*, named for Missouri’s second largest city, will be the seventh U.S. Navy ship of its name. The first *St. Louis* was laid down in February 1827 at the Washington Navy Yard and was decommissioned following the Civil War. For more, [read the U.S. Navy release](#).



Photo Link: <https://www.navy.mil/management/photodb/photos/181215-N-N0101-198.JPG>

★ Kirk Douglas, WWII Vet, Hollywood Star, Dead at 103

Legendary actor Kirk Douglas, who starred in such films as *Spartacus*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, and *In Harm’s Way*, has died. He was 103. Before he became a Hollywood icon, Douglas served in the Navy during World War II hunting Japanese submarines. According to a March 2019 U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs story, Douglas trained as a communications officer in antisubmarine warfare and was assigned to PC-1139—a PC-461-class submarine chaser. On Feb. 7, 1943, during a combat patrol, the crew on his ship detected a Japanese submarine by sonar and positioned themselves to drop depth charges. A fellow Sailor went to fire a depth charge marker but accidentally fired a live depth charge. Once it hit the water, it exploded, launching PC-1139 into the air. Douglas suffered abdominal injuries because of the accident. He was later sent to a hospital where it was discovered he suffered from chronic amoebic dysentery. He was discharged in 1944. Two years later, he made his film debut. For more, [read the article](#) in the *Navy Times*.



Photo Link: https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Kirk-Douglas-VOD_FB.jpg

★ NHHC Webpage of the Week

This week’s Webpage of the Week is a new entry on NHHC’s DANFS index. Named in honor of Lt. Gen. Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller—one of the most decorated Marines in U.S. history—USS Lewis B. Puller (FFG-23) was commissioned at Naval Air Station Long Beach, CA, on April 17, 1982. The ship’s sponsor was the widow of the ship’s namesake, Virginia M. Puller. Over the course of the guided missile frigate’s service, *Lewis B. Puller* rescued 23 crewmembers from a sinking South Korean freighter in 1988, participated in a number of joint exercises, and conducted multiple counter-narcotics operations. On May 26, 1996, crewmembers boarded the fishing vessel *Marabella II* and discovered 4,000 pounds of marijuana. Seizing the contraband and five crewmembers, *Lewis B. Puller* steamed to Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and transferred the prisoners and illegal drugs to the United States Drug Enforcement Agency. NHHC’s Guy J. Nasuti authored the history.



Photo Link: <https://catalog.archives.gov/OpaAPI/media/6423339/content/arcmedia/stillpix/330-cfd/1987/DN-ST-87-09065.jpeg>

★ Today in Naval History

On Feb. 11, 1945, 75 years ago, the Yalta Conference ended after an eight-day session where President Franklin D. Roosevelt, along with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet Premier Josef Stalin, discussed Europe’s post-World War II reorganization and the reestablishment of a war-torn Europe. Also discussed at the conference was the Soviets entering the war against Japan upon Germany’s defeat.



For more dates in naval history, including your selected span of dates, see [Year at a Glance at NHHC’s website](#). Be sure to check this page regularly, as content is updated frequently.

Photo Link: <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/us-people/l/leahy-william-d/usa-c-543.html>